



The Ocean
Conservancy



June 10, 2003

Secretary Ann Veneman
Country of Origin Labeling Program
Agricultural Marketing Service
USDA, Stop 0249, Room 2092-S
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0249

03-4222346
AMS

Dear Secretary Veneman:

On behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), The Ocean Conservancy, and our more than 700,000 members nationwide, we are writing to support the voluntary Country of Origin Labeling program for farmed and wild fish. However, we encourage you to include canned fish and shellfish as covered commodities for both the voluntary and required programs. We feel that the character of canned fish is not substantially different from that of fresh or frozen fish, and such, they should not be excluded as an "ingredient in a processed food item."

Country of origin labeling provisions are an important first step towards helping consumers make informed choices about their seafood, and towards building more sustainable U.S. fisheries.

Labeling is an all-American tradition. From shirts to sugar, Americans can easily learn where their favorite products are made. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the grocery store. A quick glance down the grocer's aisle yields bananas from Ecuador, avocados from California, and peaches from Georgia.

Seafood is a glaring exception. In fact, existing law allows many fish to be labeled as something they aren't. For example, in 2001, Consumer Reports conducted a test by sending shoppers into grocery stores to purchase red snapper. Six of 11 samples of "red snapper" were actually other species, including the two most expensive samples. We tolerate an absence of basic information about seafood that would be completely unacceptable for other foods. Country of origin labeling is one way to begin to address this problem.

Consumers want more information about their seafood. According to a recent survey conducted by Seaweb, over 70% of seafood consumers say they do not have enough information about the health or environmental risks associated with the seafood they eat. Wild fish are unique as a commodity because they are captured, not raised, and they are a public resource. As such, they require our stewardship to maintain their populations. For Americans to exercise that stewardship, they need to know when they are buying American-caught wild fish. We believe requiring country of origin labeling can only help consumers, fisheries, and the industries that depend on them.

Sincerely,

Kate Wing
Natural Resources Defense Council

Linda Sheehan
The Ocean Conservancy